

# Intentional Relationships

---

## *The Heart of Forming Faith*

**Eugene C. Roehlkepartain, PhD**

Vice President, Research & Development

Principal Investigator

Exploring Faith-Nurturing Relationships in Diverse Faith Communities (2018 – 2020)

Supported by Lilly Endowment, Inc.

**Search Institute**

Minneapolis, MN

[www.searchinstitute.org](http://www.searchinstitute.org)

**2020 Sprunt Lecture (Virtual)**

Union Presbyterian Seminary

Richmond, Virginia

May 6, 2020



Search Institute is a Minneapolis-based non-profit organization that partners with schools, youth programs, community coalitions, and other organizations to conduct and apply research that promotes positive youth development and advances equity. Our current work focuses on surrounding young people with developmental relationships that put them on the path to become thriving and contributing adults.

## PROJECT OVERVIEW

### Exploring Faith-Nurturing Relationships in Diverse Faith Communities

*A Search Institute study, with support from Lilly Endowment, Inc.*

This two-year qualitative study examines the dynamics of relationships that nurture the faith or spiritual lives of young people who are part of Christian, Jewish, and Muslim faith communities. It sets the stage for incubating innovative strategies and tools to be more intentional and equitable in strengthening faith-nurturing relationships. Launched in summer 2018, the study is:

1. Examining faith-nurturing relationships young people experience in their congregations, families, and communities through qualitative studies in 12 congregations. (Description of the sample is on the back.)
2. Identifying relational practices that are particularly catalytic for faith or spiritual formation that can be more intentionally and inclusively nurtured in and through faith communities.
3. Exploring the extent to which the beliefs, language, narratives, cultures and practices of diverse faith traditions align with Search Institute’s Developmental Relationships Framework through dialogue with a panel of practical theologians and leaders in Christian, Jewish, and Muslim faith communities.

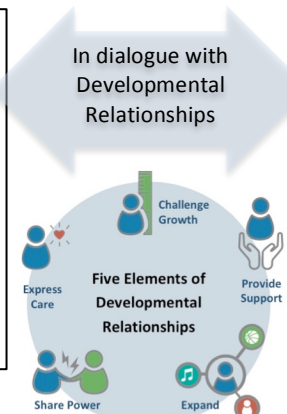
### Study Overview

**Core Purpose:** Examine the dynamics of relationships that nurture the faith and spiritual lives of young people who are part of Christian, Jewish, and Muslim faith communities, setting the stage for future practice innovations in congregations.

#### 1. Study Relationships in Congregations

**Core Questions:** How do youth experience spiritually nurturing relationships across their lives? What aspects of those relationships are impactful? What people are influential? What roles do religious communities play in shaping these relationships?

**Approach:** Conduct focus groups in 13 churches, mosques, and synagogues in two geographic areas (MN & NC) with youth, parenting adults, leaders, and “relational exemplars” identified by youth.



#### 2. Engage National Advisors

**Core Question:** How do the beliefs, language, narratives, cultures, and practices of religious traditions inform the role of relationships in spiritual development? How do these themes align with Search Institute’s framework of developmental relationships?

**Approach:** Engage an advisory panel of practitioners and theologians from diverse traditions and disciplines through interviews, in-person meetings, and an online consensus-building process.

#### 3. Synthesize and Integrate

**Core Questions:** What overarching themes emerge across diverse congregations and traditions? What accents emerged in specific contexts? Based on these findings, how might faith communities become more intentional and equitable in nurturing relationships that facilitate spiritual development? How might Search Institute’s Framework of Developmental Relationships be usefully aligned and utilized in faith communities? What innovations does the study suggest to improve future practice?

**Approach:** Dialogue with participating congregations and the national advisory panel.

**4. Disseminate:** Share findings.

**5. Innovate:** Design an innovation initiative to understand and catalyze spiritually nurturing relationships.

# The Sample for the Qualitative Study of Relationships in Congregations

## Exploring Faith-Nurturing Relationships in Diverse Faith Communities

<b>Minnesota</b> Adath Jeshurun Congregation Minnetonka Bethlehem Free Methodist Church Austin Masjid An Nur Minneapolis Northwest Islamic Community Center Plymouth	Our Lady of Guadalupe Catholic Church St. Paul Shir Tikvah Congregation Minneapolis SoyNGChurch (New Generation Church) Minneapolis Westwood Lutheran Church St. Louis Park	<b>North Carolina</b> Temple Beth El Charlotte St. Matthew Catholic Church Charlotte Myers Park Baptist Church Charlotte Caldwell Presbyterian Church Charlotte Mount Calvary Baptist Church Shelby
--	--	---

9 Urban, 2 Suburban, 2 Rural

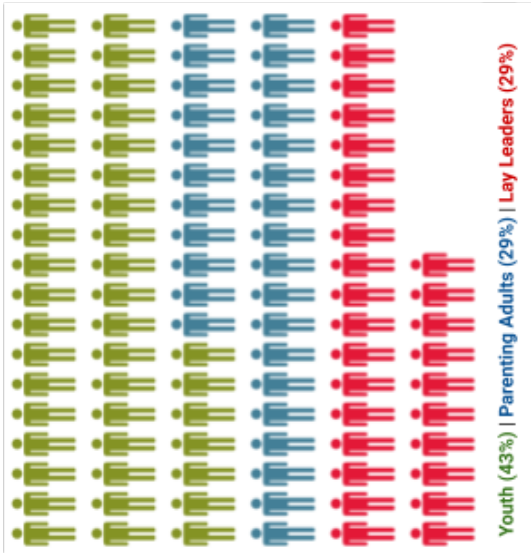


Participating congregations included a historically African-American Church, two churches with primarily Latinx populations, one mosque with primarily East African/Middle Eastern descent, one mosque with primarily African-American descent, and a variety of socio-economic communities

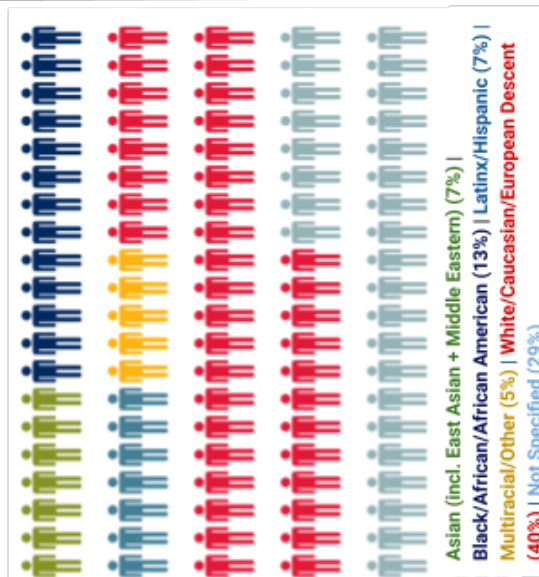
**20 Advisors** from across the United States, including clergy, scholars, and youth ministry/youth work professionals participated in two in-person convenings, individual interviews, and an online Delphi process.

Traditions represented:

- Christianity - Catholic, Evangelical, Mainline Protestant, Historically African-American churches, non-denominational
- Islam
- Judaism



192 people participated in focus groups



**+ 25 relational exemplars** were interviewed, including clergy, parenting adults, mentors, congregation staff, and even a peer!






## Reframing Relationships and Faith Formation

	Common Assumptions	Reframing: Envisioning a Relationship-Based Approach
<b>What</b>	<i>Relationship = Love, caring</i>	<b>Multi-dimensional, bi-directional relationships</b>
makes a faith-nurturing relationship?		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Faith-nurturing relationships are <i>well-rounded relationships</i> that integrate the dimensions of a developmental relationship (p. 5).</li> <li>Faith-nurturing relationships are characterized by a <i>mutual respect and reciprocity</i> between everyone involved (p. 6).</li> <li><i>Elements</i> of a faith-nurturing relationship (e.g., express care, share power) <i>interact with each other</i> in response to situations (p. 6).</li> </ul>
<b>Who</b>	<i>Parents, youth workers</i>	<b>Faith community, family adults, and peers</b>
is responsible to have and maintain developmental relationships with youth?		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>People throughout the congregation, community, and extended family play meaningful roles in young people’s faith formation.</li> <li>Peers are recognized as resources for each other’s faith nurture.</li> <li>How might congregation’s education, formation, and educational opportunities be different if we really took this seriously?</li> </ul>
<b>Why</b>	<i>Attract, keep them coming</i>	<b>Relationships are the roots of faith, leadership, thriving</b>
do we focus on building relationships with youth?		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Young people are most likely to <i>develop a vibrant faith</i> through authentic, trustworthy developmental relationships.</li> <li>Through relationships and role models, young people see themselves as <i>leaders and contributors</i> to their faith communities.</li> </ul>
<b>When</b>	<i>During programs, rituals</i>	<b>Ongoing growth and learning (no timeline)</b>
does faith nurture need to happen?		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Faith nurture and development is a lifelong journey.</li> <li>Nurturing faith through relationships is more like nurturing a sapling to a mature tree than carving wood or passing on history.</li> <li>Different people’s faith journey’s occur in different ways and on different timelines.</li> <li>Rituals bring meaning to significant life events, connecting young people’s own lives to the narratives of the tradition.</li> </ul>
<b>Where</b>	<i>Youth programs, home</i>	<b>Environments that are cultivated to nurture relationships</b>
does faith nurturing happen?		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Faith-nurturing relationships can grow virtually anywhere.</li> <li>They are most likely to flourish in environments or cultures that are “cultivated” to nourish relationships.</li> <li>Relationships are harder to grow in environments undermined by bias, discrimination, trauma, inequities, and other toxins.</li> <li>Young people are part of the whole congregation, and faith nurturing occurs throughout the life of the congregation.</li> <li>Faith-nurturing relationships can also grow at home, online, at school, in sports, and in other parts of young people’s lives.</li> </ul>
<b>How</b>	<i>Programs</i>	<b>Relational actions, practices in a relationship-rich culture</b>
do we cultivate faith-nurturing relationships with young people?		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>People of all ages develop practices of intentionally reflecting on life experiences and contemporary issues through a lens of faith.</li> <li>Faith formation occurs in the context of well-rounded, mutual relationships in which all are growing and learning. (p. 7-8)</li> <li>Congregations invest in cultivating a leadership, practices, and cultures where faith-nurturing relationships flourish. (p. 9-10)</li> </ul>

# Search Institute’s Developmental Relationships Framework

Developmental relationships are the roots of success and resilience that give young people the nourishment, support, and stability they need to grow, learn, contribute, and thrive. Search Institute research has identified five elements of relationships—expressed in 20 specific actions—that give relationships their power.

It is important to remember that the nourishment flows both ways in strong relationships. Each person gives and receives. However, for the purpose of clarity, the actions in the Developmental Relationships Framework are expressed from the perspective of one person in the relationship. Imagine each person saying it.

	Elements	Actions	Definitions	Related Faith-Specific Actions*
 <p><b>Express Care</b> “We show that we matter to each other.”</p>		<b>Be dependable</b>	Be someone I can trust.	Pray with me or for me, especially when I am experiencing struggles in life.  Make it easy to talk about faith and life.
		<b>Listen</b>	Really pay attention when we are together.	
		<b>Believe in me</b>	Make me feel known and valued.	
		<b>Be warm</b>	Show me you enjoy being with me.	
		<b>Encourage</b>	Praise me for my efforts and achievements.	
 <p><b>Challenge Growth</b> “We push each other to keep getting better.”</p>		<b>Expect my best</b>	Expect me to live up to my potential.	Remind me how my faith guides my values and choices; “call me out” if needed.  Push me to go deeper with my faith.
		<b>Stretch</b>	Push me to go further.	
		<b>Hold me accountable</b>	Insist I take responsibility for my actions.	
		<b>Reflect on failures</b>	Help me learn from mistakes and setbacks.	
 <p><b>Provide Support</b> “We help each other complete tasks and achieve goals.”</p>		<b>Navigate</b>	Guide me through hard situations and systems.	Help me figure out my own beliefs.  Share your own beliefs and help me make connections between religious teachings and real life.  Share your own struggles, questions and stories about faith, and support me when I struggle to understand my faith.
		<b>Empower</b>	Build my confidence to take charge of my life.	
		<b>Advocate</b>	Stand up for me when I need it.	
		<b>Set boundaries</b>	Put in place limits that keep me on track.	
 <p><b>Share Power</b> “We treat each other with respect and give each other a say.”</p>		<b>Respect me</b>	Take me seriously and treat me fairly.	Respect my beliefs, the choices I make, and the time I need to grow my own faith journey.  Invite me to take on leadership roles in the faith community.
		<b>Include me</b>	Involve me in decisions that affect me.	
		<b>Collaborate</b>	Work with me to solve problems and reach goals.	
		<b>Let me lead</b>	Create opportunities for me to take action and lead.	
 <p><b>Expand Possibilities</b> “We connect each other with people, places, and ideas that broaden our worlds.”</p>		<b>Inspire</b>	Inspire me to see possibilities for my future.	Inspire me through your words, actions, and excitement to be involved and grow in my faith.  Invite me to new groups, activities, or experiences in the faith community.
		<b>Broaden horizons</b>	Expose me to new ideas, experiences, and places.	
		<b>Connect</b>	Introduce me to more people who can help me develop and thrive.	

\* These examples of faith-specific actions were expressed by young people who participated in our study on faith and relationships.

## Developmental, Faith-Nurturing Relationships: Underlying Principles

---

1. Developmental, faith-nurturing relationships involve **interaction among the five elements**.
2. Developmental, faith-nurturing relationships are **two-way, mutual relationships** (benefit, contribution).
3. Developmental, faith-nurturing relationships are about **community, not just one-to-one relationships**.
4. Developmental, faith-nurturing relationships are **essential for all young people**.
5. Developmental, faith-nurturing relationships need to be **reinforced across aspects of young people's lives**.
6. Developmental, faith-nurturing relationships interact with **contexts as well as individuals' culture, strengths, needs**.
7. Developmental, faith-nurturing relationships are **undermined by** individual, group, systemic, and historical **bias, discrimination, trauma, and inequities**.



## Individual Change: Nurturing Relationships Through Faith Communities

These ideas can start within the congregation. They can also extend to how the congregation, its leaders, and its members live out their faith and values in their everyday lives in their families, workplaces, and communities.

### All Adults

#### Express Care



- Actively listen to young people during brief conversations. Reflect back what they have said to show you're listening.
- Privately check in with young people who aren't acting like themselves.
- Give young people space to express their feelings without judging them for it.

### Clergy and Other Leaders

- Model care as a priority in the faith community by noticing what's happening in the lives of parenting adults, young people, and staff.
- Consistently thank the faith community for their roles in creating a strong relational culture.

#### Challenge Growth



- Expand young people's thinking by asking hard questions, providing alternate explanations, and encouraging openness to different opinions.
- Emphasize mistakes are a necessary part of learning. Praise young people for hard work, whether they succeed or fail.

- Model how you put in an effort to learn and grow from feedback.
- Challenge the community to reflect on ways relationships can be strengthened to support and connect people of all ages.

#### Provide Support



- Show young people how to ask for help when they need it.
- Give more support when young people are struggling, and less when they are making progress. Step back as their skills and confidence build.

- Elicit feedback from staff and youth to identify the spiritual, academic, emotional, and mental supports youth need. Remove obstacles that block youth from receiving these supports.
- Encourage congregants to be present relationally with neighbors when they are experiencing challenges or need extra support.

#### Share Power



- Let young people make decisions about activities you do together and what you talk about. Don't jump in too fast when they don't make quick decisions or think of things to talk about.
- Ask young people what they think can be done to help make the faith community inclusive to all. Collaborate with them on an improvement idea.
- Offer young people opportunities to lead in planning and executing an activity or group.

- Regularly ask members from different subgroups and ages within the community about their perspectives on issues and priorities.
- Ask youth for feedback on many different aspects of congregational life—not just programs specifically for them. They may be energized to work with you to enhance aspects of congregational life that you hadn't expected.

#### Expand Possibilities



- When young people seem curious about a topic or issue, ask questions such as "how can we find out more about that?" or "what strikes you about this?"
- Introduce young people to a wide range of people, places, ideas, cultures, and vocations. Start with ones they're curious about.

- Provide adults and young people the opportunity to experience other faith communities for personal development.
- Invite community experts to visit with young people and adults to share skills, knowledge, and diverse perspectives.

## Youth

## Parenting Adults and Grandparents

### Express Care



- Let your parent(s) or connections in your faith community know when you appreciate something they've done, even if it's a little thing. A spontaneous thank you or a hug can mean a whole lot to them.
- Follow through when your parent(s) or friends ask you to do something. It will build their confidence that they can count on you.

- Pay attention. Focus on each other when someone is talking about things that matter to them. Put away your cell phones to give each other your full attention.
- Make time for lightness. Share in some humor, fun, and laughter amid the practical tasks that you do together.

### Challenge Growth



- When you set a personal goal for yourself, tell your parent(s) or connections in your faith community about it. Ask them to check on you and hold you accountable.
- When you or a family member, friend, or connection in the faith community has a setback or makes a big mistake, wait a bit, and then, talk together about what you might learn from the experience.

- Expect kids to do their best, even when doing something they don't really like.
- Remind kids that making mistakes is a part of learning. Praise them for hard work, whether those efforts succeed or fail. (And when you make mistakes, don't try to hide it; be honest and show how you're learning from them.)

### Provide Support



- Don't wait until the last minute if you need help figuring out a challenging problem or situation. Talk with someone early when there may be more options and solutions.
- If you want to solve something by yourself, but you need to think out loud about it with someone, come up with your own words to say: "I don't want you to tell me what to do, I just need you to let me think out loud and to ask me questions."

- When your kids aren't getting the help they need, find people who can address the issue.
- Give kids more support when they are struggling, and less when they are making progress. Step back as their skills and confidence build.

### Share Power



- Offer to take on a new responsibility that gives you a chance to show new skills and abilities while also benefiting others.
- If you're not happy with the way something is working in the faith community, ask for a time to talk about how you might try a different approach. Bring some suggestions or ideas to try instead.

- Include kids in thinking about decisions that affect them, even when you have to make the final call.
- Let kids make decisions about activities you do together and what you talk about. Don't jump in too fast when they don't make quick decisions or think of things to talk about.

### Expand Possibilities



- When you learn something that others don't know are interested in, ask them if they'd like you to show them how to do it.
- Ask others for their perspectives on faith, life issues, or other topics of interest to you.

- Introduce youth to a wide range of people, places, ideas, cultures, and vocations. Start with ones they're curious about.
- Find ways for your children to spend time with people who are different from your family.



## Congregational Change: Becoming a Place Where Relationships Flourish

What might it look like if your congregation were to become more intentional in weaving a focus on developmental relationships throughout congregational life? Below are six priorities that are emerging from Search Institute’s research. After each priority are statements describing some ways it might be expressed. Jot down **what your congregation is already doing** in each area. Then **add new things you’d like to try**.

### 1. A Congregation-Wide Emphasis on Relationships

	<i>What we’re already doing:</i>	<i>New things we’d like to try:</i>
a. Our congregation’s leaders consistently communicate that building relationships is essential for nurturing faith and spirituality.		
b. The importance of relationships in our tradition’s beliefs, texts, and heritage are emphasized in our worship and teaching.		
c. Our congregation thoughtfully and creatively uses its resources (such as staff, budget, space, program time, web presence) to encourage people to develop strong relationships.		

### 2. An Inclusive Relational Culture

	<i>What we’re already doing:</i>	<i>New things we’d like to try:</i>
a. People who often experience discrimination or exclusion* feel welcomed, valued, and respected by each person in our congregation.  * Due to income, race, ethnicity, age, disabilities, sexual orientation, gender identity, or other differences.		
b. Our congregation’s religious rituals, practices, and communication reinforce shared values about how we treat other people, including how we relate to those from different cultures, religions, and backgrounds from our own.		
c. Members and leaders show that relationships are a core strength of congregational life through shared language and practices.		

### 3. Intentional Intergenerational Community

	<i>What we’re already doing:</i>	<i>New things we’d like to try:</i>
a. People of many different ages regularly spend time together building relationships through shared learning, service, worship, music, meals, festivals, or other activities.		
b. Children, youth, and adults learn practical skills to build relationships with people of different ages and backgrounds.		
c. People of many different ages share their stories, wisdom, questions, struggles, hurts, and hopes with each other.		

#### 4. Engage Young People as Leaders and Contributors

	<i>What we're already doing:</i>	<i>New things we'd like to try:</i>
a. Young people have opportunities to be part of in immersive experiences (which last a day or longer, such as a retreat, camp, or service project) where relationships with peers and adults can deepen.		
b. Young people are seen and heard contributing in meaningful ways throughout our congregation.		
c. Young people actively participate in our congregation's partnerships with the community.		

#### 5. Partner with Families in Nurturing Faith and Relationships

	<i>What we're already doing:</i>	<i>New things we'd like to try:</i>
a. Families in our congregation have opportunities to build a supportive community with other families.		
b. Our congregation guides families in understanding how faith shapes their relationships in everyday life (e.g., work, school).		
c. Our congregation provides learning opportunities for families to strengthen relationships at home in ways that deepen faith throughout their lives.		

#### 6. Grow Relationship-Expanding Partnerships in the Community

	<i>What we're already doing:</i>	<i>New things we'd like to try:</i>
a. People who live near our congregation see it as a positive, valued, and trusted part of the community.		
b. Our congregation works with community partners to challenge systems and barriers that negatively impact youth and their families.		
c. Our congregation builds relationships with others in the community to advocate for resources and opportunities for youth and their families, such as safe community centers, parks, events, and gardens.		

*If you try something based on these ideas, please let us know! Send a note to Gene Roehlkepartain (gener@searchinstitute.org).*

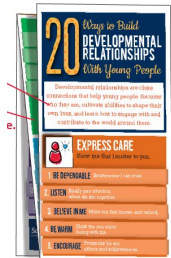
If you would like to participate in a test **THIS MONTH** of a survey being developed for congregations that includes these elements, **we'd love to include you**. It's anonymous. Go to <https://bit.ly/congregationsurvey2020> to complete the survey. Everyone who takes the survey is entered in a drawing to **win one of ten \$50 Amazon gift cards**. Parents may give their teenagers permission to enter, too. They can win a gift card too.

## We'd Like to Stay in Touch

If you're interested in receiving more information about Search Institute's research or potentially being part of future work, please let us know. Visit <https://survey.search-institute.org/s3/sprunt-follow-up> to sign up for the following:

- ✓ **Test the new survey** on qualities of relationship-rich congregations. *(Enter to win a \$50 Amazon gift card.)*
- ✓ **Get updates and findings** from "Exploring Faith-Nurturing Relationships in Diverse Faith Communities."
- ✓ Get a copy of the **slides and handout** from Gene Roehlkepartain's Sprunt lecture.
- ✓ Learn about opportunities to be part of Search Institute's **next potential project** with faith communities.
- ✓ Receive news on all of Search Institute's **research, tools, and workshops**.

## Relationships-Building Tools and Services from Search Institute



People (mini poster)—

### 20 Ways to Build Developmental Relationships with Young People

This bilingual poster highlights the five elements of developmental relationships and the 20 actions that support those elements. Share with educators, parents, youth workers, and others who connect with youth. [www.searchinstitute.org/shop/](http://www.searchinstitute.org/shop/).



Relationships First: Creating Connections that Help Young People Thrive

This booklet introduces the Developmental Relationships Framework, research on the power of relationships, and strategies for becoming more intentional in relationship building. **Download for free:** [www.searchinstitute.org/relationships-first](http://www.searchinstitute.org/relationships-first).

## Getting Relationships Right: A Workshop for Leaders

This workshop lays the foundation to begin implementing Search Institute's Developmental Relationship framework in schools and youth-serving organizations. Participants leave ready to be more intentional and inclusive in building developmental relationships with and among young people. Visit [www.searchinstitute.org/professional-development](http://www.searchinstitute.org/professional-development).



### Keep Connected: Strengthening Families by Strengthening Relationships

**Keep Connected** offers a **seven-session workshop series** for parents and their middle schoolers. Families explore the five essential elements of parent-youth relationships through a mix of learning and sharing activities. **In-person and online training institutes** equip leaders to offer this resource in their organization or community. Visit: [www.KeepConnected.info](http://www.KeepConnected.info).

Keep Connected also features activities and conversations on a **free website** for families.

### Surveys

[www.searchinstitute.org/surveys](http://www.searchinstitute.org/surveys)

Surveys examine developmental relationships, social-emotion learning, program quality, and developmental assets. Each survey is offered online.

### Workshops

[www.searchinstitute.org/professional-development](http://www.searchinstitute.org/professional-development)

Build expertise and develop strategies to put Search Institute research into practice with a range of workshops, which are offered in person and online.

### Other Resources

[www.searchinstitute.org/shop/](http://www.searchinstitute.org/shop/)

Search Institute offers a variety of print resources for educators, youth workers, parents, and other leaders.

Search Institute • 3001 Broadway Street NE, Suite 310, Minneapolis, MN 55413  
[www.searchinstitute.org](http://www.searchinstitute.org) • 612-376-8955